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ABSTRACT

Competency testing in New York State began in the nineteenth century, first with a local testing mandate and later with the "preliminary Regents examinations," which were administered at the end of the eighth grade. Optional competency tests were introduced in 1962, and in 1976 the Board of Regents mandated the passing of a series of basic competency tests as a requirement for local high school diplomas beginning in June 1979. However, the basic competency tests were criticized as "too easy," and the competency testing program was completely restructured in 1978. The new Regents competency testing program consists of tests in reading, writing, and mathematics that establish more rigorous diploma standards for students graduating in June 1981 and thereafter. The program also mandates early identification and remediation, and provides for alternative means of demonstrating competency in the basic skills. (Author/BW)

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Abstract

Competency testing in New York State began in the Nineteenth Century, first with a local testing mandate and later with the "preliminary Regents examinations," which were administered at the end of the eighth grade. Optional competency tests were introduced in 1962, and in 1976 the Board of Regents mandated the passing of a series of basic competency tests as a requirement for local high school diplomas beginning in June 1979. However, the basic competency tests were criticized as "too easy," and the competency testing program was completely restructured in 1978. The new Regents competency testing program consists of innovative tests in reading, writing, and mathematics that establish more rigorous diploma standards for students graduating in June 1981 and thereafter. The program also mandates early identification and remediation, and provides for alternative means of demonstrating competency in the basic skills.

COMPETENCY TESTING IN NEW YORK STATE

The purpose of this paper is to describe the current competency testing program in New York State in the context of earlier testing programs designed to assure that students have developed a minimal level of proficiency in the basic skills by the time they graduate from high school.

Origins

Although competency testing is viewed as a product of the 1970's, New York's first competency testing program was instituted more than 150 years ago. At that time, the Regents were responsible for distributing the "literature fund," an early form of State aid to the academies. The funds were distributed on a per-pupil basis using enrollment data supplied by the schools. It became clear that some schools were receiving more than their fair share of the fund by enrolling students who were ill-prepared for academic studies. To correct this, the Regents passed an ordinance in 1828 that limited enrollment in the academies to those students who could demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, and geography "on examination duly made" (Bradley, 1883, p. 31).

This local testing mandate -- our first competency testing program -- failed to change the enrollment figures to any significant extent. Consequently, in 1865 the Regents established a system of State examinations -- competency tests -- in English grammar, spelling, arithmetic, and geography "to determine which

scholars in each academy are entitled, under the provisions of law, to be counted in the annual apportionment of the literature fund" (Murray, 1881, p. 462). These "Regents examinations" sharply reduced the number of scholars reported by the academies and cannot have failed to improve the quality of education provided by these institutions.

The adjective, preliminary, had to be added to the name of the Regents examinations in 1877 when a series of advanced examinations made its debut. The advanced examinations were designed, in the language of Chapter 425 of the Law of 1877, to "furnish a suitable standard of graduation from said academies and academic departments of union schools, and of admission to the several colleges of the State" (Bradley, 1883, p. 36). The advanced Regents examination program still continues, with examinations in more than twenty high school subjects, but the preliminary examinations were discontinued in 1959. With the growth of junior high schools, housing grades seven, eight, and nine, there was little justification for administering examinations at the end of the eighth grade (Gilson, 1950).

The first competency test with the word competence in its title appeared only a few years after the preliminary Regents examinations were withdrawn. It was the Minimum Competence Test in Reading, for which test development began in the fall of 1961. The test manual stated that the purpose of the test was the evaluation of "the reading achievement of pupils in terms of minimum standards for high school graduation" (Minimum Competence, 1962, p. 5). Allen (1962) described the test in this context:

> The Department feels that the evaluation of the achievements of our schools and colleges is an area in which the vigorous exercise of state leadership is of paramount importance in the improvement of education. Therefore, among other things, we plan to prepare minimum competency tests in such fields as reading, arithmetic, writing, citizenship, etc., and to urge that success on these tests be made a prerequisite for high school graduation (p. 16).

Although the State Education Department subsequently published a Minimum Competence Test in Arithmetic Fundamentals, few school districts actually required their students to meet the recommended standards as a prerequisite for a high school diploma. In 1965 the tests were incorporated into New York's statewide assessment program, the Pupil Evaluation Program, and were administered to all students beginning the ninth grade. However, the tests proved unsuitable for the Pupil Evaluation Program because they could not discriminate among students at the upper end of the score scale, so they were withdrawn in 1972 in favor of new ninth grade reading and mathematics tests.

Basic Competency Tests

As the 1960's drew to a close, Commissioner of Education Ewald Nyquist created a state examinations task force to review the State's testing programs and to determine if any changes were needed. The task force, which was composed of members of the Education Department staff, traveled throughout the State to gather opinions and submitted its report in 1971 (Report, 1971). The major recommendation focused on the need for a more systematic approach to the evaluation of education in New York State, relating test scores to all of the variables that impinge on educational quality.

This recommendation was accepted by the Regents and was given a sense of urgency by the demand for accountability that surfaced at about the same time. During 1972 the Education Department explored a variety of alternatives and developed an evaluation plan consisting of a series of studies comparing New York State pupils with pupils nationwide, a continuation of existing testing programs, and the establishment of "basic competence level examinations." It also described plans for developing "reading effectiveness measures" and a computerized "instructional evaluation system" to be used in the evaluation of projects supported by special project funds (Elementary, 1973).

The basic competency tests were to be developed first in "English (reading and other language skills)" and mathematics and later in social studies and science. It was intended that students would have multiple opportunities to attempt these examinations during their high school years, but the proposal did not specify how the test scores would be used. It was suggested that the tests could become a graduation requirement or could be used as a basis for awarding "certificates of competencies" similar to the certificates awarded in bygone days to those who passed the preliminary Regents examinations.

The first basic competency tests in reading and mathematics were administered to all ninth grade pupils in the fall of 1975. The tests were developed in the State Education Department with the help of classroom teachers, following the procedures used to prepare the high school Regents examinations.

The 40-item reading test contained examples of reading materials encountered in everyday life -- notices, labels, recipes, timetables, maps, newspaper articles, etc. Through multiple-choice questions, pupils were asked for specific details contained in the reading material. The 50-item mathematics test measured the ability to understand basic concepts, perform the fundamental operations, and solve simple application problems.

Although the tests were given an adult coping-skills flavor, they measured instructional objectives specified in the Department's syllabuses for grades K-8. To pass the tests, pupils had to correctly answer 65 percent of the questions, a traditional standard in New York State. Data gathered after the fall 1975 administration indicated that 90 percent of students beginning ninth grade passed the reading test and 80 percent passed the mathematics test. In the spring of 1976, the Regents adopted a resolution requiring pupils to pass basic competency tests in reading and mathematics in order to receive a high school diploma in June 1979 and thereafter.

In the fall of 1976, three new basic competency tests were administered to all ninth grade pupils. The test in writing skills contained questions on capitalization, punctuation, spelling, grammar, sentence writing, paragraph writing, and letter writing. Although some parts could be objectively scored, all answers were written by the pupil. The social studies test was entitled "Civics and Citizenship" and measured a knowledge of government, Constitutional rights, citizenship responsibilities, and economics.

The science test was entitled "Practical Sciences and Health" and, as the title implies, measured knowledge of basic science concepts and health-related topics such as nutrition, disease, drugs and alcohol, first aid, and community health. The social studies and science tests each contained 40 multiple-choice questions (New York, 1977).

Data gathered after the fall 1976 administration indicated that 80 percent of students beginning ninth grade passed the writing skills test, 78 percent passed the science test, and 65 percent passed the social studies test. In the spring of 1977, the Regents added these three tests to the diploma requirements of those graduating from high school in June 1980 and thereafter.

Thus, in the spring of 1977, the basic competency testing program was in place. It had been determined that the program would follow the pattern of the high school Regents examination program, with new, secure tests in all five subjects scheduled for administration each January, June, and, eventually, August. Pupils could attempt the tests at the end of the eighth grade and, if they failed, retake them as often as necessary. The program would assure that no pupil who was seriously deficient in the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics, or who lacked a fundamental understanding of civics, citizenship, science, and health, would receive a high school diploma.

Regents Competency Tests

Late in 1977, several members of the Board of Regents expressed their concern that the basic competency tests did not set a suitable standard for the high school diploma, that the tests were too basic. Their views were widely supported by members of the State Legislature, by editorial writers, and, presumably, by the general public. Because students could attempt to pass (and, indeed, most did pass) the tests before entering high school, it was evident that the tests did not measure skills and knowledge acquired in grades 9-12.

In addition to the diploma standards represented by the basic competency tests, the program was weak in a number of other respects. For example, two of the tests -- Civics and Citizenship and Practical Sciences and Health -- were not entirely limited to objectives specified in Department syllabuses. While there was agreement that a high school diploma recipient should be able to pass these tests, their content validity could not be demonstrated to the extent required for tests of educational achievement. In addition, there were no alternatives to the basic competency tests for demonstrating proficiency in the subjects tested. All students were required to pass the competency tests, even those who passed the more-difficult Regents examinations.

Questions were also raised with regard to remedial programs. Although it was expected that schools would provide special help to students who failed a basic competency test, remediation was not mandated in the Rules of the Board of Regents or in the

Regulations of the Commissioner of Education. Consequently, it was entirely possible that the basic competency tests would have no effect upon the instructional program provided to high school students with deficiencies in the basic skills.

A survey conducted in the first months of 1978 revealed that school administrators were also dissatisfied with the basic competency testing program. About 59 percent of the superintendents and 63 percent of the high school principals felt that the tests were too easy, and both groups favored the acceptance of high school Regents examination scores in lieu of basic competency test scores (A Report to the Board of Regents, 1978).

Thus, during the spring and summer of 1978, the Department staff, guided by the new Commissioner of Education, Gordon Ambach, completely redesigned the basic competency testing program and renamed it the Regents competency testing program (Spillane, 1978). The title was appropriate because the Board of Regents actively participated in the planning process.

The new program focuses exclusively on the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. Although there is no lack of interest in the areas of social studies and science, the Regents competency testing program gives priority to the first goal of education in New York State, "Mastery of the basic skills of communication and reasoning essential to live a full and productive life" (Goals, 1974, p. 6).

The most significant change made in the competency testing program was the introduction of entirely new tests that measure the basic skills in an academic rather than an adult context.

The Regents Competency Test in Reading utilizes the Degree of Reading Power (DRP) approach to measure a student's ability to read with comprehension. The development of the DRP methodology began in the early 1970's (Evaluation, 1974) with the aid of grants from the Carnegie Corporation and reached the point in 1978 where it's use in a statewide testing program was clearly appropriate.

Tests utilizing the DRP methodology consist of a series of nonfiction prose passages on a variety of topics. Each passage contains about 300 words. The passages are presented in order of difficulty, beginning with easy material and progressing to difficult material. Seven words are omitted in each passage, and the student selects the most appropriate word from the five alternatives provided for each deleted word.

The test items are designed so that the text of the passages must be read and understood in order for the student to respond correctly. All of the response options "fit" the blank space; each one makes a grammatically correct and logically plausible sentence if the sentence is considered in isolation. However, only one response "fits" or is plausible when the surrounding context of the passage is considered. Thus, the selection of the correct response depends on understanding the prose in the surrounding text. The student should be able to respond correctly to all or nearly all items in the test to the point where he or she cannot understand a passage sufficiently well to decide which word is the correct choice.

The deleted words and the other response options are words in common use and are of uniform difficulty throughout the test. Thus, the test items become more difficult only with respect to the difficulty of the text in the passages. All of the information that is needed to select the correct response is provided in the text of the passages; there is no need to supply information from memory or past experience. Only the ability to process sentences for meaning is required for success on the test.

The Regents Competency Test in Writing is a direct measure of a student's ability to organize and present ideas in written form. The test consists of three different types of writing tasks: a business letter, a report, and a piece of persuasive discourse (composition). For each task the specific test questions are based on one of the topics appearing in the list of 25 topics which has been established for that task.

In the business letter, the student requests corrective action because of a problem such as failure to receive a product ordered by mail, defective processing of film, or unsatisfactory repair of an item. In the report, the student reorganizes a set of notes and writes a unified report for a specific audience. Subjects include a meeting on energy resources, an interview with a performer, and a visit to a local industry. In the composition, the student attempts to persuade a specific audience by stating and supporting a position. For example, the student may be asked to persuade a parent concerning the need for a particular privilege or persuade a local public official concerning the need for summer jobs.

In the rating of answers for the Regents Competency Test in Writing, the technique of holistic scoring is used. This means that each answer is rated on the basis of its total effect and overall quality. Raters are given exemplary model answers and decide what percent of the model a student's answer represents. Each of the three answers for each student is rated by a different person. Thus, the total score for a student on the Regents Competency Test in Writing is a composite of three raters' judgments. (See Kenosian, 1980, for a description of the rating evaluation process.)

The Regents Competency Test in Mathematics is designed to measure competence in the skills described in the syllabus, "General High School Mathematics." This is the recommended high school mathematics curriculum for students not enrolled in Regents mathematics courses. The test questions cover the core areas of: integers and rational numbers, including the fundamental operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of whole numbers, decimals, and fractions; graphing, including critical analysis and interpretation of graphs and charts; measurement of geometric figures; ratio, proportion, and percent; probability and statistics; and consumer and job-related mathematics.

With the introduction of this new mathematics test, the list of high school courses that a student must complete in order to receive a local high school diploma, as specified in the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, was expanded to include a year of mathematics. Although most school districts already required a year of mathematics in grades 9-12, this had been mandated in the Regulations only for recipients of a Regents diploma.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe the process of setting the high school diploma standards. (See Byrne, 1979, for a description of the process with respect to reading comprehension.) However, it is important to note that school personnel, community leaders, and the general public were afforded many opportunities to react to the standards that were established by the Regents on a tentative basis in July 1978 and confirmed in March 1979 (Regents Competency, 1978).

Although the new tests and new standards are its most visible features, the Regents competency testing program was designed to assure that all students are provided with an instructional program that will enable them to meet the diploma standards in reading, writing, and mathematics. The program emphasizes the early identification of students who need special help, and remediation is mandated.

The process of identification is not left entirely to the local schools. Since 1965, all students beginning grades 3 and 6 have been required to take the Pupil Evaluation Program tests in reading and mathematics. Students scoring below the designated "state reference points" on these tests have always been considered in need of special help, but now schools are required to provide these students with appropriate remedial instruction. A direct link between the sixth grade reading test and the diploma standard in reading was added in the fall of 1979 with the introduction of a new test using the DRP methodology.

In either grade 8 cr grade 9, at the option of the local school, students are administered preliminary competency tests in reading and writing and, again, those scoring below the state reference points must be remediated. On the basis of guidelines provided by the State Education Department, some students may be excused from taking the preliminary competency tests if there is good evidence that they will be able to meet the diploma standards. The preliminary competency tests follow the format of the final competency tests, including the use of the DRP methodology in reading.

Remediation is also required for students who fail one of the final Regents competency tests. The test in mathematics is first administered to most students at the end of the ninth grade, and the tests in reading and writing are first administered in grade 11. Thus, the identification and remediation process continues throughout the high school years, where students have multiple opportunities to pass the final tests.

New tests, new standards, and a new emphasis on early identification and remediation distinguish the Regents competency testing program from its precursor, the basic competency testing program. But there is another important difference. As originally conceived, all students had to pass the basic competency tests in order to receive a high school diploma; the new program gives students a variety of alternatives for demonstrating competency in the basic skills. More than half of New York State's high school students -- the more academically-able -- will meet the testing requirements by passing the

traditional Regents examinations in English and mathematics. Others will meet the testing requirements on the basis of scores obtained on the College Board's SAT or the American College Testing Program assessment. Alternatives are also provided for students who are new to English-language schools and for students with handicapping conditions (Regents Competency, 1979).

The new diploma standards become effective in June 1981, although many members of that graduating class were "saved harmless" by virtue of having passed the basic competency tests in the ninth grade. Thus, the real impact of the new standards will not be felt until June 1982. Less than one percent of the candidates for diplomas in June 1979 were affected by the basic competency tests in reading and mathematics, and similar results are anticipated in June 1980 despite the addition of a writing skills requirement.

It is still too early to make any predictions about the number of students who will be unable to meet the diploma standards in June 1981 or in later years. It is evident that all schools are working diligently to improve their students' skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. And there is a sense of optimism that the goal of the Regents competency testing program will be realized, that high school graduates in New York State will be better prepared for further education and useful employment in the years ahead.

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